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AUTHOR Grobman, Duane, II
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ABSTRACT

Stemming from a teacher/researcher's experience in a public school where music was "hated" by students, this study investigates how early elementary students understand and appreciate music, and how classroom teachers can help students in this process. The research was conducted in a first and a second grade class in two Boston (Massachusetts) area schools. Equipped with a compact disk (CD) player, music, a tape recorder, and a series of lesson plans, the teacher/researcher conducted eight one-hour sessions with the second grade class and four fifty-minute sessions with the first grade class. She asked questions to elicit responses. The research revealed that students approached understanding music in seven different ways: specific instruments heard, repeats or patterns in the music, parts or divisions identified, sounds of the notes, images created by the music, connections with a prior memory, and feelings evoked. Classroom teachers with little or no musical training can incorporate music instruction in their classrooms to supplement instruction given by specialists. Knowing the way students approach music can aid teachers in guiding students to a deeper understanding of music. (Contains 19 references.) (LH)

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ED 411 209

TEACHING MUSIC, DEVELOPING UNDERSTANDING, AND THE CLASSROOM TEACHER

Duane Grobman II

Harvard University Graduate School of Education
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ABSTRACT

This research explores two questions in the learning and teaching of music: How do early elementary students go about understanding the music they hear? And how can classroom teachers incorporate music instruction in the elementary classroom? As an example of teacher research, this study stems from a teacher/researcher's experience in a public elementary school where music was "hated." After changing students' attitudes toward music, this teacher/researcher sought to understand how students think about the music they hear. Based on Duckworth's Extended Clinical Interviewing, this research reveals that students approach thinking about music in seven different ways. With implications for music specialists and classroom teachers alike, this study adds both information and questions to the debate of how music can be taught in our schools.

I. RESEARCH CONTEXT

This exploration begins with my interest in and curiosity about my students' thoughts regarding music. My interest stems from my years teaching in public elementary schools and one memorable incident. As a classroom teacher I am expected to teach all subjects to the wonder-filled students who inhabit my classroom each day. From the familiar Three R's -- reading, writing, and arithmetic -- to social studies and social adjustment (including peer pressure and the consequences of substance abuse), I am expected to "cover" it all.

In many elementary schools specialists are hired to teach that which either the classroom teacher feels ill-equipped to do, and/or that which the particular community deems a priority or an enrichment. In my experience, specialists are also hired, at times, to do that which has fallen through the cracks. This has included those curricular areas which have been neglected or ignored over time. During my teaching career I have worked with specialists in the areas of art, science, reading, and music. Often the latter, music, is either neglected in the school or routinely relegated to a specialist; it is rare that much music instruction or appreciation transpires within the walls occupied by the classroom teacher.

The event I am writing about, that is one impetus behind this research, took place while teaching

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second grade students in New Mexico. This particular school was an urban school drawing from a largely low-income and Latino student population. The two specialists hired at this school were both music teachers, one teaching general music (to K-6) and the other band (to grades 4-6 only). My students had music class with the general music teacher for a half an hour twice a week.

Put simply, my students *hated music* (these were their exact words). Twice a week as I led them down our school's hallway to the music room, they gave me the strong impression that I was leading them to a prison cell. "Do we have to go?" they pleaded. Followed by, "I hate music!" Their negative thoughts and feelings had only intensified when I picked them up thirty minutes later for our trek back to our classroom. At the tender age of seven these kids *hated* music and by the end of the school year I vowed to see my students' perspectives on music change the following year.

The following year I found myself at a new school with a different music teacher. This school was located in the same city but in a suburban/rural part, and drew a mixed student population of Whites, African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans of various economic backgrounds. As I approached the new school year I thought, "Perhaps I don't have to do anything about music within my classroom after all. Perhaps the problem was solely a reflection of that other music teacher."

I asked students and teachers about their thoughts and feelings regarding music and music class. "What is music class like?" "What do you do in music class?" "Do you like it?" "Why or why not?" These were just some of the questions that I asked. The responses I got were luke-warm with little enthusiasm shown for what transpired in music class. Although this was an improvement on what I had encountered previously, I didn't hear from anyone that they loved music. Shouldn't *someone* at the school *love* music?

I made a commitment before I met the music teacher, whom I later came to know and found to be very supportive, to do something with music in my classroom to engage students and to cultivate an appreciation for music. Highlighting a composer a month, we listened to their music several times a week, learned some biographical facts about the composers, engaged in brief discussions about the music, and often did art projects stemming from a particular piece of music. Not once did I hear the words "I hate music" that year, even walking down the hall to music class. Rather, a frequent request I heard during moments of quiet study was, "Mr. Grobman, would you put Beethoven (or Mozart, or Vivaldi) on?" The more they heard, the more they wanted to listen. Encore performances by our composers the following year produced the same responses from my students. "Mr. Grobman, would you put Chopin on?"

The second impetus behind this exploration stems from my curiosity about how students understand music and how classroom teachers, not just music specialists, can help students appreciate and understand music. This research is an examination of the questions that spring from that curiosity. Some of these questions are:

- What do children think about when listening to a piece of music?
- What things do they hear?
- How do they distinguish one piece of music from another?
- What in a piece prompts them to remember it when played days or weeks later?
- What language do children use to talk about the music they hear together?
- What responses do children seem to value and find meaningful in responding to a piece of music?

Armed with this curiosity I set out to discover how students listen to and understand music. In contrast to my days in New Mexico where I aimed at changing attitudes toward music, this time I sought to develop an understanding of how students think about music. By examining students' responses to music I sought both to learn from their discourse and to improve it, and through it, to increase their understanding of the music. Developing understanding was my goal, the understanding of my students' developing knowledge of music.

It should be noted that I, the teacher/researcher, have had little formal music training and no instruction in the teaching of music. As a child I, like many, learned to play an instrument in elementary school and junior high, but I discontinued playing the clarinet my sophomore year in high school. Reading and playing music today would take a lot of tutoring and practice. I did take one music appreciation course in college, which I thoroughly enjoyed, but that was 15 years before I began to bring music into my classroom in any significant way.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Three primary theorist's views comprise the framework for this research, namely Eleanor Duckworth, Jean Piaget, and Jeanne Bamberger. Given that Duckworth was a student and co-worker of Piaget, their respective work has many connections. Similarly, the work of Duckworth and Bamberger has many connections, starting with their collaborating work in teacher development for the National Institute of Education in 1979.

Bamberger asserts in *Making Music Count* that, "Formal music education, both general and instrumental, largely fails to take into account what we already know intuitively about music, substituting instead a formal system of musical ideas which we have great difficulty connecting with what we already know" (Bamberger, 1979, p. 2). If this is true, what implications does it make for music and classroom teachers? How then do teachers go about discerning what students intuitively know about music? And what are some of the initial approaches to understanding that students take in thinking about music?

In exploring instruction, learning, and curriculum of any subject area, Duckworth sets the goal for the teacher of "understanding children's understanding" (Duckworth, 1987, p. 83). For her the examination of students' thinking and the development of knowledge is central. Duckworth's articulation of Piaget's perspective is helpful in considering how students

understand music. She states: [W]hatever sensory experiences a child undergoes, they have only the meaning that the child gives them. There is no meaning which is obvious in and of itself. . . . sensory impressions are always interpreted" (Duckworth, 1979, p. 6). My research seeks to uncover the interpretations students make of the music they hear.

In *Developing Knowledge*, Duckworth writes that the title is a play on words addressing "how does knowledge develop" *and* "how we can help it develop" (Duckworth, 1988, p.1). These two questions were central considerations in my research. I sought to discover how children's understanding of music develops *and* I sought to discover how, as a classroom teacher, I can help it develop.

An approach Duckworth uses to "understand children's understanding" is a methodology called Extended Clinical Interviewing, which aims at examining how students' ideas develop in the process of learning. For the teacher in this role, "The main thing -- common to Piaget's interests, as well -- is the focus on how children are making sense of the situation in their own way" (Duckworth 1987, p. 92). To do this teachers and students must work with a concrete object, in this research for example, musical selections. The teacher then helps the students to not only engage with the object but also to encourage them to pursue their own ideas about that object. Duckworth encourages teachers to follow and understand how a child's understanding develops. This can be seen to be in contrast to how some perceive Piaget. Duckworth responds:

> Piaget's problems were not intended, and cannot well be used, to pinpoint any one child's level. Piaget's goal was to trace the development of a *notion*, and to do this he based his conclusions on a whole set of protocols. However, it is the good fortune of educators that his clinical method, and the problems he posed to children, are wonderful probes for revealing a child's thinking in ways at once richer and less precise than the assignation of a substage. (Duckworth 1987, pp. 87)

The Extended Clinical Interviewing method uses the probes of questions to reveal student's thinking. In her Introduction to *Developing Knowledge*, Duckworth emphasizes the significance of the "teacher's stance." A proper stance, she explains, includes "the importance of respecting the learner's ideas, and of listening to find out where the learners are" (1988, p. 3).
With this in mind, my frequent opening question, "What did you notice?" or "What did you hear?" after listening to a piece of music, hopefully props the door wide open to the learner's ideas and to discern "where the learner is." Once the door is open, additional questions help to clarify for the teacher a student's understanding. Duckworth offers a sample of such questions:

- What do you mean?
- Why do you say that?
- Could you give an example?
- How did you do that?
- How does that fit with what she just said?
- How did you figure that?
- I don't really get that; could you explain it another way?

(Duckworth, 1987, p.97)

Finally, I am in agreement with Bamberger who believes that far too much academic research with apparent relevance to classrooms rarely gets there. To address this dilemma she makes the suggestion: "I will argue that the way out of the dilemma of the non-congruence between academic research and the classroom is to turn the matter on its head -- to *begin* with teaching experiments which can, in turn, inform research, for example in music theory, more traditional experimental research in cognition, and also curriculum development and teacher training" (1979, pp. 1-2). What follows *is* a teaching experiment, and one I hope will inform further research, ongoing curriculum development, and future teacher education.

III. RESEARCH SITES

This research was conducted in two schools. Both locations found me with enthusiastic and supportive teachers and cooperative and curious students.

The first location was in School A (all names in this study are pseudonyms) working with Emma Churchill's second grade class. School A is a private school (preK - 12), with a predominately White student population, located in a suburb of Boston. Mrs. Churchill works in a self-contained class composed of twenty-one second graders.

The second site was School B working with Tina Larson's first grade class. School B is a public school (K-8), with mostly White students, in an urban/suburban part of Boston. Mrs. Larson is a specialist teaching primarily the visual arts. Her first grade art class is made up of twenty students.

IV. METHODOLOGY

I conducted eight one-hour sessions with the students in Mrs. Churchill's class and four fifty-minute sessions with Mrs. Larson's class. I came to each session equipped with the following items: a compact disc (CD) player, selected CD's of music, a tape recorder, and a series of lesson plans. My lesson plans varied depending on the prior session's occurrences but typically included at least one piece of music to listen to and talk about. On most occasions I did not inform the students of the composer and title of the piece they were listening to. My thinking in withholding this information was that I hoped it would free them to think about the music solely by listening to the specific sounds. After listening to a piece the first time, a frequent opening question I posed was, "What did you notice?" From the various responses I would ask questions of clarification or elaboration. For example, if a student said, "I heard violins," I might ask, "What sounds did they make?" or "When in the piece did you hear them?"

It should be noted that all selected music contained no vocals. Selected musical pieces included

Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons*, Handel's *Watermusic*, and the movie music by the composer John Williams (*E.T.*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *Superman*, *Jaws*, *The Cowboys*, and *Star Wars*). Only in a very few cases (of which I took note) were any students familiar with the pieces of music beforehand.

After listening to a musical selection followed by an initial class discussion, we would listen to the piece a second and third time. Each time we would stop to discuss what we heard and then listen for a new (or old) thing identified by the students. Following this, students were given an opportunity to write or draw, and in some instances paint, about their understanding of the piece.

V. DATA ANALYSIS

As mentioned, all sessions with students were tape-recorded, portions of which were transcribed. In addition, I wrote field notes and memos in order to document each session. The data was then coded according to the identified type of response students made. Initially I did this according to larger categories, namely, oral expression, written expression, artistic expression, and kinesthetic expression. Then I analyzed the data for themes that arose within or across categories. In analyzing the data it became apparent to me that there were seven primary ways in which students approached understanding a piece of music.

VI. FINDINGS

The seven ways in which students approached understanding music included:

1. Specific musical instruments heard.
2. "Repeats" or "patterns" in the music.
3. "Parts" or divisions identified.
4. Sounds of the notes.
5. Images created by the music.
6. Connections with a prior memory.
7. Feelings evoked by the music.

These seven ways are listed according to the chronology in which the data were gathered. That is, in the first couple of sessions, students spoke of instruments, patterns, and parts found in the music during our large group discussions. The remaining four ways emerged from subsequent discussions, written work, and artistic responses.

Throughout my twelve sessions with these two groups, students' understanding of the various musical selections always related to at least one of these seven categories. The following examples help explain how these understandings were revealed.

1. *SPECIFIC MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS HEARD*

From the initial sessions with both groups, specific musical instruments heard in the music were among the first responses given to the question, "What did you notice?" For example, at School B the very first student to reply said, "I heard a violin." Then another student offered, "I heard a flute." These were followed by "a harp" and "a trumpet." Throughout these twelve sessions, describing specific instruments heard was a common way students thought about a particular piece of music. In subsequent sessions, when comparing or identifying the differences between pieces of music, several students would again use specific instruments to reveal their understanding.

2. "REPEATS" OR "PATTERNS" IN THE MUSIC

After listening to Handel's *Watermusic* and posing the questions, "What did you notice," Amanda offered this understanding: "Things were repeating. . . . the notes were repeating in different parts." Others in the room acknowledged they heard repeating things as well. Some compared it to a "pattern" in the notes that they heard over and over.

Examples of student responses indicating repeats or patterns include:

- "There were violins, then a mixed part, then the same violins."
- Steve sang a repeating part which prompted other students to do the same with other identified repeats/patterns.
- "I heard a line of music and it did the same line of music over again."
- In listening to Watermusic, Kelvin drew a picture of a radar and wrote: "It reminds me of radar and when your(sic) really sick and your(sic) in the hospital the machine checks your heart beat. The repeat is perpetual."

3. *"PARTS" OR DIVISIONS IDENTIFIED*

After listening to *Watermusic* Kelvin said he saw a connection between this piece and Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons*. Intrigued by this idea, I asked him in what way did he see a connection. He replied that, "They both had four parts." I asked him what a "part" was and he relayed that Vivaldi had written one whole piece of music, *The Four Seasons*, and divided it into four parts, namely, "*Winter, Spring, Summer*, and *Autumn*. They each sounded "different." So too, he thought, with Handel's *Watermusic*. (The students did not know the name of this piece and were only listening to the segment titled *Alla Hornpipe*). He indicated that he heard "four parts" where the music changed. Others indicated that they heard "parts" as well.

We listened a second time for "parts." Afterwards students indicated that they often heard more or less than four parts. When I asked, "What told you that there was a new part," Yvonne related

this fascinating understanding:

> It kinda sounded like either they were making fake ends, so that to kind of trick you, so that it was more like, Oh, this piece is still on. Or they were just rests. And that made the song have different parts.

"Rests" she then clarified, were periods "where there is no sound." These were often points at which students identified a new part.

4. *SOUNDS OF THE NOTES*

Some students thought about music not in terms of parts or repeats or instruments but in various ways of describing the "sounds." These descriptions varied and included such adjectives as loud and soft, high and low, or slow and fast. One student talked about the *Winter* piece saying, "I heard that at first it was soft and then it got very loud." This way of understanding music was central to the discussion that took place the following week. After listening to *Winter* from the prior week again, and *Spring* for the first time, the following dialogue took place.

Tanya: Last week it started also slow like the second one.
Chris: It went high to low. (Sang it for us)
Pat: I heard it that the second one went from high to low (like last week) and that the first piece I didn't hear that.
Rick: I heard on the second piece that it was the same as last week because it started off lower and then it got higher and higher.
Andy: Last week, first it was very soft and then high then soft. And the second one was like that. The other one was like high/low/high/low.

5. *IMAGES CREATED BY THE MUSIC*

Without the suggestion of title or composer some students thought about a piece of music in images. A memorable example came in listening to John William's *Superman* piece. Mark shared that the piece "reminded me of, like, knights fighting." Across the room came Paul's astonished and excited voice declaring, "That's what it made me think of!" Here, separate from one another, two students held the image of knights fighting while listening to this music.

In our discussions about a piece, it was frequent that a student would state, "It made me think of _____ (and relate a person, place, or thing). Flags waving, a snowy day, ghosts, and the mountains, were all pictures students drew of images particular pieces of music created for them. For some it was an abstract drawing of "swirls" and "scribbles" and "designs." Still others, used words to describe their images prompted by the music. In response to Handel's *Watermusic* Steve drew a picture of a Ferris wheel and then wrote on the back, "How good it would be if the world was full of love, peace, and joy and brothers and sisters dwelled together in harmony."

Relational harmony was the image *Watermusic* created for him. This was one way he understood the music.

6. *CONNECTIONS WITH A PRIOR MEMORY*

In contrast to images created by the music, where students would state, "The music made me think of horses" (or birds or buildings), some students' response to a particular piece was, "It reminded me of *The Nutcracker*," or, "It reminded me of a parade I saw once." For these students, the music made them think of a prior time when that music, or something similar to it, was part of their experience.

Often this connection was to another piece of music. Several students thought Handel's *Watermusic* reminded them of Tchaikovsky's *The Nutcracker*. Some could tell you the specific part in the ballet that it reminded them of. Other students thought Vivialdi sounded like *Phantom of the Opera*. Amanda had a very different connection to *Watermusic*. She wrote:

> When [I] listen to this music I think of my mom. When she was a child she would take naps. She would ask her mom [to] put music on. This music sound[s] like the music she listen[ed] to. She use[d] to call it sleepy music. Sometimes my mom puts music on like this when I do homework.

In talking with Amanda, this was the primary way she thought about the piece the first few times she heard it. For her, this was a meaningful way to understand the piece at that time.

7. *FEELINGS EVOKED BY THE MUSIC*

The final way in which students approached understanding a piece of music was as feelings evoked by that music. Early on I identified that this was one of the ways students understood music. "It sounded cheerful" or "happy" were frequent response to *Watermusic*. John Williams' movie music, written to create a mood or specific feeling to a story captured on film, prompted these students to think and talk about their feelings in connection with a particular piece of music. I was amazed how frequently the feelings they identified matched the movie and its context. (This was true for students NOT familiar with the composer, title or film). For example, several students thought that the *Superman* piece sounded "brave," "bold," "strong," and full of "suspense."

The piece of music that evoked the strongest and most consistent evidence of feelings was Williams' *Jaws* (this was without knowing its title or source). Many students shared either verbally, in writing, or with pictures that the music sounded "scary," "freaky," "surprised," and "dangerous." Amanda even shared that in listening and thinking about the piece, "I get goosebumps."

VII. EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

This research addresses two important questions in the area of music instruction:

1. How can classroom teachers incorporate music instruction in the elementary classroom?
2. How do students go about understanding the music they hear?

The first question is a significant one. As noted, often music instruction is either relegated to music specialists or neglected altogether in schools. In times of economic pressure, it is frequently the fine arts, including music, which is among the first targets to reduce school budgets. Although I strongly disagree with this approach to budget reduction, it is a reality faced by many in schools across the United States. Is it possible for classroom teachers to teach music, particularly elementary teachers who have limited or no training in music? This research, though limited in sample size, seems to indicate that it is possible, given the resources and the desire to do so. However, this should not be interpreted as an indication that music specialists should or can be eliminated. Rather, it suggests that a classroom teacher can supplement the music instruction given by specialists *and* can aid in the cultivating of students' developing understanding of music.

The second question is equally significant. If teachers, *including* music specialists, are to effectively instruct students in music, they must understand how students understand the music they hear. Too often teachers assume students think about a particular piece of music in the same way as the teacher. This research reveals that students approach thinking about music in at least one of seven ways. If a teacher has these seven ways in mind, he/she is better able to go about the business of music instruction, and in guiding the student to a deeper understanding and appreciation of music. To do this teachers need to take the risk of experimenting in their teaching. This underscores a belief of Bamberger's that, if "elementary teachers can learn to carry out teaching experiements in the classroom, they will be in a better position to find the relevant puzzles and to better understand a *child's* knowledge-in-action with respect to a given task situation -- his powerful intuitive strategies for constructing *his* reality. And, in turn, the child will be helped to bridge the gap between this and the ways of knowing expected of him in school" (Bamberger, 1979, p. 2).

In closing, I want to acknowledge that when it comes to teaching music in public schools, it is not unusual for a teacher to hear from a parent or community member, "Oh, they can take music on their own after school." While this may be true for some students, it is not true for all. Given the number of hours that students spend in school, the connectedness of music to various aspects of life and the school's curriculum, and the joy derived from simply listening to a piece of music, I am convinced of music's rightful place in our schools. Further, if schools can move students from *hating* music to *loving* music, perhaps it is yet another example of how teachers can move students from viewing something as *boring* to experiencing it as something *wonderful*.

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